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TECHNOLOGY & THE GIFTED

Focus, Facets, and the Future

In the transition from the industrial age in the information age, the 21st century has brought with it new challenges for the educational needs of the nation's youth. Information-intensive and technology-driven jobs encompass 60% of America's job market (Jukes, 1997). Over the last decade, over half of the new jobs created in the United States have evolved from new technologies (Jukes). Occupational futurists predict that in the first decade of the 21st century, eight out of every ten jobs will be information-intensive (Jukes; Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1990). The National Science Foundation (1997) estimates that by the year 2010, one-fourth of all new jobs will involve technology. Effective leaders and productive citizens will need to possess both skill and confidence in their abilities to use and manipulate technology and information (Jones, 1990; Jukes; Morgan, 1993).

Educational reform proponents suggest that in order to supply the demand for such jobs, schools should focus on increasing students adaptability and flexibility. Students should be taught to assume more responsibility for their own learning, to think critically, and solve complex problems both individually and cooperatively (Morgan, 1993). Jukes (1997) notes that the current generation of students will change careers five to seven times within its lifetime. In an information-based society, the skills of obtaining and organizing information, the ability to discern relevancy of that information, and the process of making connections between theory and practice are essential (Mann, 1994; Morgan, 1993). Information literacy and learning should be the agenda of our educational system.

New technologies can be powerful tools for the advancement of all learners. However, in light of the characteristics of gifted learners, technology can be an essential tool in providing educational programming to address the specialized needs of gifted learners (Lewis, 1998; Mann 1994). Maker and Neilson (1982) suggested that effective learning environments for the gifted incorporate the following precepts:

- become learner centered instead of teacher centered;
- emphasize independence instead of dependence;
- reflect an open attitude toward new ideas, innovation, and exploration;
- focus upon complexity not simplicity;
- utilize a variety of grouping options;
- employ a flexible structure instead of a rigid or lack of structure; and
- incorporate high mobility.

In general, gifted students are capable of rapidly learning more complex material than their same-age peers (Clark, 1997; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). In order to facilitate the learning of their students, teachers should use a differentiated curriculum that provides greater depth, varied topics, and an accelerated pace so knowledge may be advanced rather than simply mastered (Bulls & Riley, 1997; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Hertzog, 1996; Lewis, 1998).

When computers and related technologies are incorporated into the learning environment for gifted students, they can support program goals and address the individual needs of the gifted (Jones, 1990). By integrating technology into the curriculum, gifted students have the opportunity to:

- be active participants in their own learning;
- work at their own pace and ability level;
- create original and innovative products;
- eliminate the mundane, previously mastered aspects of the learning process;
- be empowered to take on new roles as risk-takers, leaders, or facilitators;
- practice using tools applicable to the world outside of the classroom;
- research independently;
- explore topics at a greater depth and breadth;
- think critically in real-world situations; and
- collaborate with others as problem solvers (Lewis, 1998; Morgan, 1993; Poftak, 1998; Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Sais, 1996; Washington, 1997).

The adaptability of technology allows individual learning preferences to be enhanced (Jones, 1990). Used as a tool in a structured learning experience, technology can be used to develop strengths and overcome or neutralize weaknesses while providing flexible pacing and enhancing personal responsibility for one's learning (Jones). Thus, the integration of technology not only addresses the general characteristics of the gifted student, but also incorporates the competencies required of the information-based work place.

Focus

Empirical research examining the efficacy of technology integration in the gifted curriculum is practically nonexistent in the scholarly gifted journals (Riley & Brown, 1997). The literature regarding technology and gifted education is comprised largely of "best practices" articles that tell of specific strategies or programs that worked with a particular population (Adams & Cross, 2000). The practices most commonly discussed include Internet usage, distance learning, and multimedia presentation tools.

Internet Usage

Using the Internet as a research tool provides the gifted learner an opportunity to examine any

desired topic to the depth and breadth applicable for any given assignment while requiring the student to be an informed, discerning consumer of the information presented (Bulls & Riley, 1997; Krupnick, 1997; Lewis, 1998). The Internet also facilitates information dissemination overcoming physical, social, and geographic barriers that once impeded such widespread communication (Lewis).

Online mentoring. Online mentorships are also available through the Interact (see Appendix A). Experts from universities or industry are now accessible to students in even the most remote locations (Krupnick, 1997). Instead of reading about the results of an experiment conducted by researchers, students are now able to pose questions to the actual researchers in the field.

Electronic mail. Electronic mail (e-mail) is also another web-based tool that can facilitate cooperation on the student-to-student level, student-to-teacher, or the student-to-expert level (Krupnick, 1997; Lewis, 1998; Mann, 1994). Both students and their teachers can use technology to communicate instantaneously with people from distant lands (Lewis). E-mail is also a convenient way to facilitate communication with parent or students at home (Lewis).

Listservs. Electronic mailing lists or listservs are online discussion groups, administered by a software program, in which each message is sent to a common e-mail address, which then forwards the message to all members on the list (Ko & Rossen, 2001). These discussion forums provide a venue for communication with others interested in a common topic (see Appendix B). Listservs can serve as a way for users to overcome isolation. Teachers are able to find supportive colleagues with whom to express the concerns and joys of teaching the gifted. Students can experience the camaraderie of knowing that other gifted students share similar trials and tribulations. Parents, too, can find support from others who advocate for the unique social and emotional needs of their gifted children (Lewis, 1998).

Virtual publishing. Publishing a web page is another option provided by the Internet. Gifted students can use this medium as a method of publishing their work, demonstrating a particular proficiency, teaching a concept, or introducing themselves and their interests. Web pages can be continually updated and provide a means of empowerment for the gifted student to take control of his or her own learning and product development on a continuum (Strot, 1997).

Distance learning. Distance education describes any form of learning that does not involve the traditional classroom setting in which student and instructor are in the same location at the same time (Ko & Rossen, 2001). Distance learning can take many different forms. Audio conferencing via speaker phones, online coursework, electronic blackboards, video conferencing, satellite downlinks are just a few of the various telecommunication formats available (Adams & Cross, 2000; Ko & Rossen, 2001; Mann, 1994). For students who have needs for coursework, enrichment, or both beyond the general curriculum, distance learning in one of its modalities may provide the differentiation required (see Appendix C). This may be especially beneficial for students in remote locations who, due to lack of school resources, would not have the opportunity to take advanced course content (Lewis, 1989; McBride & Lewis, 1993; Southern & Spicker, 1989). Likewise, students who, due to a disability, illness, or injury, are unable to attend classes in the regular educational setting, gifted educational setting, or both can also benefit from such technological integration.

Multimedia Presentation Tools

The term multimedia encompasses a wide array of tools available to author videos, slide shows, newsletters, or magazines among other presentation formats. Utilizing these various programs enables gifted students to become actively engaged, challenged, and possess ownership of their own creative productivity (Troxclair, Stephens, Bennett, & Karnes, 1996).

Facets

It is important for teachers to remember that technology integration into the classroom

experience is a tool through which curriculum content is conveyed. Technology should not become the focus of the truly integrated lesson. When planning the use of technology, teachers of the gifted should pay particular attention to the modes of learning represented by the gifted learners being served as well as the atypical populations within the gifted classroom (e.g., gifted girls, at-risk students).

Modes of Learning

According to Stettler (1998), student learning can be categorized into four areas or modes when using technology resources: acquirer of information, retriever of information, constructor of information, and presenter of information (see Table 1). When planning the integration of technology, students' modal preferences should be considered (Stettler). Stettler suggested the elements and activities of a lesson should consist of 20% acquirer, 25% retriever, 40% constructor, and 15% presenter. Wilson (as cited in Poftak, 1998) concurred with Stettler's approach by noting that many gifted children learn best in project- or performancebased approaches, especially when the learning activities are engaging, authentic, and applicable to real-life situations.

Gifted Girls

Even though both girls and boys begin on an equal level with technology and show similar affinity and competence in technology-rich activities during the lower elementary school years, research has shown that by the time they reach upper elementary school, girls lose interest in technological pursuits (McLester, 1998). McLester also noted that this gender gap widens proportionally as educational levels increase. According to the United States Bureau of Labor statistics (2001), the professional work force trend in the 1990s saw female computer professionals drop from 35.4 to 29.1% (McLester). Without advanced technology training, females will continue to be excluded from viable careers in science, math, and technology (McLester). In order to combat this trend, not only must teachers of the gifted be aware of the situation, but they must also actively endeavor to reverse it.

Strategies to Get Girls Involved in Technology. Girls are less likely than boys to feel "at home" with technology (McLester, 1998). When teachers provide them with opportunities for play and open-ended exploration on the computer (e.g., girls' computer clubs, girls-only lunch, or after school periods for computer usage), girls gain confidence and comfort with technology. When working in coed, cooperative groups, classroom rules should ensure that girls have equal opportunities to perform high-status computer-based tasks. Often, girls defer to boys and may inadvertently be assigned fewer technology related tasks (e.g., installing software, setting up printers or computer labs; McLester). When designing technology-integrated lessons, teachers should include components that meet girls' needs for social interaction. Group problem solving and evaluation within technology-integrated lessons may be incorporated. Girls should be involved in technology early since they form many beliefs about themselves and subject domains in early elementary school (McLester). Challenge girls to think out of the traditional female rut of language arts by enticing them to the predominantly male domains of math and science. Teachers should expose students to female role models in technology by incorporating research-involving women's contributions to the field.

Gifted At-Risk

The gifted at-risk student includes those who are culturally diverse, possess multiple exceptionalities, live in rural areas, or underachieve. At-risk gifted students are often painfully aware of their unique differences from their peers. If they are bored or unchallenged, these students may not engage in the traditional classroom setting. These uninterested, understimulated students are often candidates for discipline problems, dropping out of school, or self-inflicted harm (Poftak, 1998). When technology is integrated, however, at-risk students will

engage with print media (Lieb, 1997; Poftak). Carefully planned technology integration may serve to spark the interest of these students and may help them develop self-confidence, self-reliance, and social adaptation skills (Lieb).

Strategies for Using Technology With Gifted At-Risk Students. Software programs that involve interactive, real-life simulations may appeal to the practical aspect of at-risk students' personalities. These programs require students to confront the consequences of simulated behaviors (Lieb, 1997). Using technology to enhance both convergent and divergent approaches to studying and learning may harness previously untapped potential in some atypical populations (Passow, 1996). Technology also addresses the experiential, community-based component that may be absent in some gifted programs (Passow). By expanding the realm of communication through the Internet, new learning communities are developed that break down barriers previously experienced by certain at-risk populations.

The Future

The future of technological integration in the gifted classroom depends largely on teacher applications and training, as well as funding for both the acquisition and maintenance of such innovations. However, evidence of teacher training, support, and appropriate integration of technology is sketchy, at best (Berger, 2000). A study by the Milken Exchange on Education Technology (1998) suggests that teacher technology training has not yet matched the need for web-based integration in the classroom. Many teachers continue to use general software application packages (e.g., word processing) or assign the use of reference tool software or game-like programs deeming their use "technology integration" (Means, 2000). Without empirical research of the efficacy of the practices already in place, it is unlikely that the future will see continued growth in technology-based integration as our educational system continues to sound the horn of accountability.

Teacher Applications and Training

The planning of appropriate educational experiences for gifted students often involves the acquisition of materials beyond the regular curricular supplements (Lewis, 1998). Technology can provide new resources for this task. There are many Internet sites that house a broad range of lesson plans that are easily adaptable for any classroom. Similarly, the background information necessary to introduce a specific topic or to develop original units is readily available on the Interact (Lewis). E-mail not only works as a communication enhancer for students, but it also serves as a portal of communication for the teacher to facilitate colleague-to-colleague, teacher-to-student, teacher-to-administration, teacher-to-parent, and teacher-to-community dialogues. Newsgroups and listservs are available on various topics and can provide contact with experts in the field.

Professional development in gifted education, as well as in technology training can both be facilitated by technology. Gifted education professional development is available through distance learning techniques and has been successful (Lewis, 1998). In order to integrate technology effectively into the classroom, teachers must feel comfortable with technology. As with any other strategy, time must be spent on acquiring the necessary skills and actually practicing with the techniques before effective implementation can be displayed in the classroom. The key to the effective use of technology depends on joining successful teaching practices with technological tools that increase the applicability of appropriate strategies in the context of the gifted learner (Riley & Brown, 1998).

Funding

According to Williams (2000), 63% of America's classrooms have Internet connections. Unfortunately, that means that 37% of our classrooms do not have equitable access to the Internet. Grant writing, donations, and community partnership programs can assist in the

acquisition and maintenance of technology, but the long-term improvement of instruction via technology requires a commitment from the entire school community. Until technology is accepted as a necessity rather than a luxury, it is unlikely that effective technology integration will see the continued growth it now enjoys (Sais, 1996). A technology plan is essential to guide the subsequent purchase of technology to expand and update the systems already in use (Sais). The lack of such a strategy may lead to the purchase and acquisition of a hodgepodge of equipment using various formats and platforms that may or may not be supported and upgraded. The use and integration of technology in the classroom requires that evaluations of its effectiveness must be made (Shaklee & Landrum, 2000).

Further Research

In today's climate of educational accountability on the national, state, and local levels, it is imperative that empirical research be conducted to affirm the efficacy of the integrated technology practices that are being incorporated into gifted classrooms. In order to justify the cost and labor required to maintain and upgrade the technology already in place in our nation's schools, decisions based on research must be made in order to determine effective and ineffective uses of technology (Shaklee & Landrum, 2000). Are distance-learning courses providing qualitatively differentiated instruction for gifted students? Do multimedia presentations offer more pizzazz than authentic content mastery? Is technology being used for more than enrichment for the gifted student who finishes class work early? Are students being taught how to properly navigate the Internet as a research tool? Are curricula that incorporate technology producing higher student educational outcomes than those that do not? As educators, we must evaluate the effectiveness of the practices we implement in order to adapt and adjust those practices to better address the varied needs of our gifted students.

Table 1 Key Features of the Four Learning Modes Using Technology

Acquirer of Information

- Consumes rather than produces information.
- Masters core knowledge and skills sequentially.
- Technology is presented in a tutorial, simulation, or drill and practice format.
- Learning is teacher-driven.

Constructor of Information

- Produces rather than consumes information.
- Extends core knowledge and skills.
- Utilizes high-level thinking skills.
- Results in a student product communicated through multimedia.
- Learning shifts from linear to nonlinear and back again.
- Learning shifts from teacher-driven to student-driven.

Retriever of Information

- Discerns retrieved information.
- Extends of core knowledge and skills.
- Learning is nonlinear, mosaic fashion.
- Learner sifts through information deciding on its applicability.
- Learning is student-driven.

Presenter of Information

- Communicates information to an authentic audience.
- Extends core knowledge and skills.
- Communicates in multimedia format.
- Presents organized information in a linear fashion.
- May range from entirely student-driven to a student/teacher partnership.

Note: Adapted from "Matching technology to modes of learning," by L. M. Stettler, 1998, *Gifted Child Today*, 21(2), pp. 44–49. Copyright c 1998 Prufrock Press, Inc. Adapted with permission.

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Appendix A Internet Sites Offering Online Mentoring

Ask An Expert <http://njnie.dl.stevens-tech.edu/askanexpert.html>

Suitable for all grade levels, this site provides links to experts in a number of different fields. The site also contains a "Classroom Projects" page for examples and suggestions for Interact-based projects and activities.

Pitsco's Ask An Expert <http://www.askanexpert.com/askanexpert/askanexpert.html>

Volunteers in 12 field categories answer student questions via e-mail. This site provides an extensive list of experts categorized by subject.

Ask Science Questions <http://www-hpcc.astro.washington.edu.ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/acied/sciask.html>

This site lists a plethora of links available for students to find answers to science-related questions. Everyone from astronomers to volcanologists are represented here.

National Mentoring Partnership <http://www.mentoring.org/>

This site provides the background information and support necessary to begin a mentoring program, as well as a link to ask experts.

Hewlett Packard Telementor Program <http://mentor.external.hp.com/>

This site supports 5th through post secondary students from public, private, and home-school environments to excel in math, science, and career planning.

Community for Youth <http://www.thefoundry.org/~cfy>

A Seattle-based site that provides one-on-one mentoring for high school students.

STAR Academy <http://www.lehigh.edu/~instr/star.htm>

A part of Lehigh University's Outreach Program where university students act as mentors for junior and senior high school students.

Signet Star Reinsurance Company <http://www.captive.com/Ask%5fThe%5fExpert.html>

This site provides experts in the fields of insurance, investments, and actuaries.

Ask the Experts <http://www.refdesk.com/expert.html>

This site lists a myriad of links to experts in numerous fields organized by subject and services.

Ask A+ Locator <http://www.vrd.org/locator/subject.html>

This site organizes the many "expert" sites on the Internet into an easy-to-use format. Subjects from the arts to vocational education are represented.

Appendix B Listservs

In order to begin receiving messages from the mailing list forum, you must subscribe to the listserv:

- Send an e-mail message to the listserv of interest.
- Leave the subject line of the e-mail message blank.
- In the text of the message, write: subscribe <name of the listserv> <your first and last name>. If the list is a majordomo list, then write your e-mail address instead of your name.

Listservs for Gifted Education

Giftednet-1 (listserver@listserv.cc.wm.edu)

Discussion forum for the National Science and Language Arts Curriculum Projects.

GTOT-L (GTOT-L-REQUEST@eskimo.com)

Discussion topics related to young children, usually aged six and under.

TAGFAM (listserv@maelstrom.stjohns.edu)

Online support for families of gifted children.

TAGKIDS (for information, e-mail: king@access.digex.net)

Discussion list open only to gifted children who have been nominated by a TAGFAM member.

TAG-L (listserv@vm1.nodak.edu)

Forum for discussion on general topics in gifted education.

TAGMAX (listserv@maelstrom.stjohns.edu)

Discussion list for gifted education to "the max."

TAGTEENS (listserv@maelstrom.stjohns.edu)

Forum for gifted and talented teens and college students.

U-ACHIEV (majordomo@virginia.edu)

Discussion of academic underachievement in students, including those who are gifted.

Appendix C Distance Education Opportunities

<http://www.uwex.edu.ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/disted/definition.html>

The Distance Education Clearinghouse offers definitions of distance learning and links to other distance education resources.

<http://www.usdla.org>

United States Distance Learning Association.

<http://www.wested.org/tie/dlrn>

Distance Learning Research Network.

<http://www.hoyle.com/distance.htm>

Guide to distance learning on the Web with links to college, K-12, and vocational programming.

<http://www.petersons.com/dlearn>

Peterson's index to distance learning programs.

<http://www.uidaho.edu/evo/distglan.html>

A series of guides to distance learning.

<http://www.caso.com>

Caso's Internet University has articles, listings, and links of over 2,000 distance learning programs.

<http://www.DETC.org>

The Distance Education and Training Council Online lists accredited distance learning programs and schools.

<http://www.icdl.open.ac.uk>

The International Center for Distance Learning has a searchable database of different programs around the world.

<http://www.hol.edu>

Heritage Online has Internet-based distance education courses for teachers.

<http://alabanza.com/kabacoff/Inter-Links/education/distance.html>

Information resource for distance education teachers.

<http://www.utexas.edu.ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/world/lecture>

Links to distance learning programs.

<http://www.vsg.edu.au.ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/>

The Virtual School for the Gifted.

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By Stephanie A. Nugeni

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